

The University of Chicago

HERMAN MELVILLE AND CHRISTIANITY

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1934

By
WILLIAM BRASWELL

Private Edition, Distributed by
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NOTE

Melville's annotated and marked copy of the New Testament and Psalms, volumes of Schopenhauer, Shelley, Arnold, and other authors are in the possession of Mrs. Eleanor Melville Metcalf, of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Melville's works are to the "Standard Edition," in sixteen volumes, published by Constable and Company (London, 1922-24). In quotations from this text I have Americanized the spelling of such words as "Christianise" and "honour."

Raymond M. Weaver, Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic (New York, 1921), and Meade Minnigerode, Some Personal Letters of Herman Melville and a Bibliography (New York, 1922), are referred to by only the surnames of the authors.



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CHAPTER VI

PIERRE

In his letter to Mrs. Hawthorne, on January 8, 1852, Melville changed the subject from Moby Dick by saying: "But, my Dear Lady, I shall not again send you a bowl of salt water. The next chalice I shall commend will be a rural bowl of milk." The "rural bowl of milk" was the Pierre that he was writing. To judge from the jesting remarks that he goes on to make in the letter about Hawthorne's reclusive habits, one might suspect that Melville was in hilarious spirits: "Does Mr. Hawthorne continue his series of calls upon all his neighbors within a radius of ten miles? Shall I send him ten packs of visiting cards?"¹ But Melville had small cause to be in a jovial mood. On the contrary, circumstances were such as to make him extremely unhappy.

His condition was wretched enough to make his whole outlook on life depressing. As a result of overstrain in writing Moby Dick, his health was poor, and his eyes had almost failed him.² He was in financial straits; in the spring of 1851 he was overdrawn nearly seven hundred dollars on his royalty account, and Harper and Brothers had denied him further advances.³ As a self-supporting author he was a failure, for he could not bring himself to cheapen his art enough to please a wide public. "What

¹Quoted from a catalogue of an American Art Association sale at the Anderson Galleries, Inc., New York, 1931.

²See his letter to E. A. Duyckinck, dated "Pittsfield, Wednesday, 1851," in Minnigerode, p. 73; and see the autobiographical passage on Pierre as author in Pierre, p. 473.

³See Weaver, pp. 339-40; see also Pierre, p. 470.

I feel most moved to write, that is banned, -- it will not pay," he said. "Yet, altogether, write the other way I cannot."⁴ Moby Dick was poorly received.⁵ Melville's increasing disillusionment about mankind made him isolate himself more. There was no intellectual companionship for him in his own family. Hawthorne was temperamentally unfitted to harbor a friendship so passionate as Melville had offered; and the Hawthornes had recently moved away. Melville was dreadfully alone and sad.⁶

Life at its most tragical can sometimes appear comical to a man who tries to discover the reason back of it all. During the period shortly after Moby Dick was published, Melville may have assumed in part the "genial, desperado philosophy" which he had described in that novel:

There are certain queer times and occasions in this strange mixed affair we call life when a man takes this whole universe for a vast practical joke, though the wit thereof he but dimly discerns, and more than suspects that the joke is at nobody's expense but his own. . . . And as for small difficulties and worryings, prospects of sudden disaster, peril of life and limb; all these, and death itself, seem to him only sly, good-natured hits, and jolly punches in the side bestowed by the unseen and unaccountable old joker. That odd sort of wayward mood I am speaking of, comes over a man only in some time of extreme tribulation; it comes in the very midst of his earnestness, so that what just before might have

⁴Quoted from a letter to Hawthorne, written when Melville was completing Moby Dick, in Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife: a Biography (Boston, 1885), I, 402. See also Pierre, p. 425.

⁵It should be noted, however, that "Purely moral objections had little to do with the rejection of Moby Dick . . ."; Hugh W. Hetherington, "The Reputation of Herman Melville in America" (an unpublished doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan [1933]), p. 239. The Literary World, IX (Nov. 22, 1851), 404, seems to have contained the only review that objected to some of Melville's irreverence.

⁶On Melville's disillusionment at that time, see Weaver, pp. 338-40. I wholly agree with Robert S. Forsythe that Pierre is not "the work of a mind diseased"; but I believe that Melville was much more unhappy at the time of writing the novel than Forsythe evidently would grant; see the Americana Deserta edition of Pierre (New York, 1930), p. x.

seemed to him a thing most momentous, now seems but a part of the general joke.⁷

The philosophical Babbalanja says in Mardi: "Women sob, and are rid of their grief: men laugh, and retain it"; woe "is more merry than mirth; 'tis a shallow grief that is said."⁸ It is true that it is the laughter of despair or hysteria which Babbalanja defines, and that it is only the man with his back against the wall who will subscribe to Melville's "genial, desperado philosophy." But Melville's back was against the wall; and if there is a ring of madness in the laughter in Pierre, there was ample cause for it.

Melville's temperament had probably never before been so inflamed; his genius was at white heat when he wrote Pierre. Artistically it is a very fine book; and one of its rarest qualities is that while it is the fiercest, bitterest book that Melville wrote, it is colored with an intensely refined comic spirit. No matter how strange the reaction may have been, the colossal pessimism which Melville felt did not kill his sense of humor. The sub-title of the novel is "The Ambiguities"; and Melville represents the enigmatical portrait of Mr. Glendinning as saying to his son:

. . . . a smile is the chosen vehicle of all ambiguities, Pierre. When we would deceive, we smile; when we are hatching any nice little artifice, Pierre; only just a little gratifying our own sweet little appetites, Pierre; then watch us, and out comes the odd little smile.⁹

Melville must have smiled when, in the letter to Mrs. Hawthorne, he alluded to the forthcoming Pierre as "a rural bowl of milk." He must have smiled when he thought how the critics would denounce the extremely unconventional style of the book, and how

⁷Moby Dick, I, 286.

⁸Mardi, II, 350.

⁹Pierre, p. 117.

his pious reviewers would condemn the heretical central theme and the dark fibre of the plot. He must have been perversely amused to think how ecclesiastics would damn the novel.

There is a great deal in it for good Christians to cry down. Melville's earlier novels contain some lengthy criticisms of Christianity from various angles, but generally such passages are incidental and cursory. The chapters in Mardi on Maramma and Serenia, for instance, are vitally significant; still they are a comparatively small part of a long novel. Moby Dick is a powerful epic embracing the idea of rebellion against the Deity, but it does not especially concern itself with the Church. Almost as a whole Pierre is directed against the material aspects and the ideals of Christianity. Before considering the broader treatment of Christianity in the novel, however, it is worth while to note certain passages dealing with such subjects as God, man, and immortality.

The hostile attitude toward the Deity which characterizes Moby Dick manifests itself in Pierre in passages outside of those which describe Pierre's final impious defiance of God. Ahab says that he cannot give up his chase of the White Whale because God moves him to his tragic purpose.¹⁰ In the beginning of Pierre Melville hints of the distant catastrophe, and he does not quibble at naming the divine villain in the case. Though as yet Pierre is happy, Melville says, we shall see "whether Fate hath not just a little bit of a word or two to say in this world; we shall see whether this wee little bit scrap of latinity be very far out of the way -- Nemo contra Deum nisi Deus ipse."¹¹ Since Melville considers God responsible for the tragedy of Pierre's

¹⁰ Moby Dick, II, 352.

¹¹ Pierre, p. 17.

life, his irreverence toward the Deity is not surprising. Writing of "that all-controlling and all-permeating wonderfulness" which, "by the generality, is so significantly denominated The Finger of God," he continues: "But it is not merely the Finger, it is the whole outspread Hand of God; for doth not Scripture intimate, that He holdeth all of us in the hollow of His hand? -- a Hollow, truly!"¹² The capitalization here lends more irony to the passage when one recalls that Melville had recently asked Hawthorne if he did not think "there is a slight dash of flunkeyism" in the usage of capitalizing the Deity.¹³ His fancy plays with the idea of God's ubiquity by representing Pierre as thinking that:

rail as all atheists will, there is a mysterious, inscrutable divineness in the world -- a God -- a Being positively present everywhere; -- nay, he is now in this room; the air did part when I here sat down. I displaced the Spirit then -- condensed it a little off from this spot.¹⁴

In an eloquent mock-serious passage on silence, Melville says: "Silence is the only Voice of our God"; and a few pages further on he asks: "how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?"¹⁵ A study of the symbolism of the novel will bring out Melville's more serious personal attitude toward the Deity.

The whole force of Pierre is behind Melville's thesis that man's nature prevents him from making a positive choice between absolute good and evil. As to the inadequacy of man's reason in the construction of abstract systems, Melville says: "Faith and philosophy are air, but events are brass."¹⁶ In the madhouse where Isabel was confined as a child, there were some

¹²Ibid., p. 196.

¹³Julian Hawthorne, op. cit., I, 404.

¹⁴Pierre, p. 441.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 284, 290.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 403.

inmates "always talking about Hell, Eternity, and God; and some of all things as fixedly decreed. . . ." Two "predestinarian opponents" made nearly all their companions laugh once when, "after a whole day's loud babbling," they agreed that they had convinced each other and would have to "argue it all over again. . . ." ¹⁷ The novel as a whole implies that the reasoning of sane men is hardly less futile. Melville's ridicule of the social injustice embodied in the Scriptural parable of the talents is a strong condemnation of the selfish principles by which men live. ¹⁸

While in Pierre there are no extended discussions of immortality such as one finds in Mardi, there are occasional enlightening remarks upon the subject. ¹⁹ Melville jests concerning "the sweet dreams of those religious enthusiasts, who paint to us a Paradise to come, when etherealized from all drosses and stains, the holiest passion of man shall unite all kindreds and climes in one circle of pure and unimpairable delight." ²⁰ In Mardi he had suggested the possibility that whales enjoy an after-life; ²¹ in Pierre he relates that the horse of General Glendinning, buried beneath the sod with his master, long ago "passed through that grass to glory." ²² He tells how "in the other world" the ghosts

¹⁷Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 365, denounces "that doctrine which the world actually and eternally practices, of giving unto him who already hath more than enough, still more of the superfluous article, and taking away from him who hath nothing at all, even that which he hath. . . ."

¹⁹The introductory sentence of Plinlimmon's pamphlet could hardly be taken to have any real bearing upon Melville's views regarding immortality. The pamphlet begins: "Few of us doubt, gentlemen, that human life on this earth is but a state of probation"; ibid., p. 293.

²⁰Ibid., p. 20.

²¹Mardi, I, 335-36.

²²Pierre, p. 42.

of the foes of old Pierre boast of the honor of having died by his hand.²³ When Aunt Dorothea tells Pierre as a child that his cousin Ralph is in "a far-away, beautiful country," she hopes, is "in heaven," she trusts, the matter-of-fact child sighs, "Dead," and urges her to go on with the story.²⁴ It would appear that Melville still had great doubts about man's immortality.

Pierre strikes at the heart of Christianity by relating the tragical story of a youth whose whole career is actuated by his early consecration of his life to the highest Christian virtues. So much pertinent satire and irony on the Church is fused into the background against which Pierre moves that only by following a general outline of the narrative can one appreciate the art with which Melville presents this indictment of Christianity.

Having just published a novel embodying a defiant attitude toward God for having created such a miserable world, Melville ironically represents Pierre as being born into a perfect world. With certain reservations Pierre might be said to be Voltaire upon Leibnitz with an exaggerated vengeance. Melville sings the praises of this earth:

Oh, praised be the beauty of this earth; the beauty, and the bloom, and the mirthfulness thereof! The first worlds made were winter worlds; the second made, were vernal worlds; the third, and last, and perfectest, was this summer world of ours. In the cold and nether spheres preachers preach of earth, as we of Paradise above. . . .

Oh, praised be the beauty of this earth; the beauty, and the bloom, and the mirthfulness thereof! . . . Hosannahs to this world! so beautiful itself, and the vestibule to more.²⁵

Love reclaims all the earth from evil: "All this Earth is Love's

²³Ibid., pp. 376-77. P. 417 affords some amusement on the idea of the resurrection of the body.

²⁴Ibid., p. 103.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 43-44.

affiliated; vainly the demon Principle howls to stay the banns."²⁶
In defining this Love which rules the world, Melville says of it:
"Love is both Creator's and Savior's gospel to mankind; a volume
bound in rose-leaves, clasped with violets, and by the beaks of
humming-birds printed with peach-juice on the leaves of lilies."²⁷
There is no misery among men: "Would Love, which is omnipotent,
have misery in his domain? Would the god of sunlight decree gloom?
It is a flawless, speckless, fleckless, beautiful world throughout;
joy now, and joy forever!"²⁸

Besides seeing the light in so ideal a world, Pierre is
born heir to a fine Christian tradition. His grandfather had been
"a sweet-hearted, charitable Christian; in fine, a pure, cheerful,
childlike, blue-eyed, divine old man; in whose meek, majestic
soul, the lion and the lamb embraced -- fit image of his God"; to
the sensitive observer his portrait was a Sermon on the Mount.²⁹
Pierre's father had died when Pierre was a mere boy, but had left
behind him "a marked reputation as a gentleman and a Christian.
. . . ." ³⁰ He had declared "that no man could be a complete
gentleman, and preside with dignity at his own table, unless he
partook of the church's sacraments."³¹ Mrs. Glendinning had
thought him flawless: "always think of your dear perfect father,

²⁶Ibid., p. 46.

²⁷Ibid., p. 45.

²⁸Ibid., p. 83.

²⁹Ibid., pp. 39-40.

³⁰Ibid., p. 94. "It had been a maxim with the father of
Pierre, that all gentlemanhood was vain; all claims to it pre-
posterous and absurd, unless the primeval gentleness and golden
humanities of religion had been so thoroughly wrought into the
complete texture of the character, that he who pronounced himself
gentleman, could also rightfully assume the meek, but kingly style
of Christian" (p. 6).

³¹Ibid., p. 137.

Pierre," she counselled her son.³² Frequent talks between mother and son about the departed member of the family had "stamped in Pierre's soul the cherished conceit" that Mr. Glendinning was in heaven.³³

Mrs. Glendinning and Pierre maintained the Christian tradition of the family. "At the age of sixteen, Pierre partook with his mother of the Holy Sacraments." It would be difficult to trace Pierre's motives for joining the Church:

Enough, that as to Pierre had descended the numerous other noble qualities of his ancestors; and as he now stood heir to their forests and farms; so by the same insensible sliding process, he seemed to have inherited their docile homage to a venerable Faith, which the first Glendinning had brought over sea, from beneath the shadow of an English minister. Thus in Pierre was the complete polished steel of the gentleman, girded with Religion's silken sash. . . .³⁴

Besides being possessed of manifold blessings in the chaste religion of his own family, Pierre is betrothed to the lovely Lucy, daughter of Mrs. Tartan, who, though somewhat proud, is "an excellent sort of lady, as this ladylike world goes. She subscribed to charities, and owned five pews in as many churches. . . ."³⁵

Pierre's life was so happy that there was only one other blessing he could desire, Melville says, and that was a sister. Often "would Pierre invoke heaven for a sister; but Pierre did not then know, that if there be anything a man might well pray against, that thing is the responsive gratification of some of the devoutest prayers of his youth."³⁶ At the moment when his prospects for the future seemed brightest, he was fated to receive a

³²Ibid., p. 25.

³³Ibid., p. 94.

³⁴Ibid., p. 6.

³⁵Ibid., p. 35.

³⁶Ibid., p. 7.

letter from one who signed her name: "Thy Sister, Isabel." In the letter Isabel says that she is the daughter of Pierre's father, and tells how she can no longer "endure to be an outcast in the world, for which the dear Savior died"; yet she warns Pierre that the vain world will call him a "fool" and "curse" him if he yields "to that heavenly impulse which alone can lead" him to befriend her.³⁷

When Pierre reads this letter, for him "the before undistrusted moral beauty of the world is forever fled"; his "sacred father is no more a saint. . . ." He raves for a moment; then he realizes that "heaven" has given Isabel's destiny into his care. He apostrophizes her: "I see thee long weeping, and God demands me for thy comforter; and comfort thee, stand by thee, and fight for thee, will thy leapingly-acknowledging brother, whom thy own father named Pierre!"³⁸

Since his mother idolizes the memory of his father, Pierre would not cruelly disclose to her his father's infamy. He realizes that she is too proud a woman ever to accept the illegitimate Isabel as her daughter; but he does not impugn her pride. "He too plainly saw, that not his mother had made his mother; but the Infinite Haughtiness had first fashioned her; and then the haughty world had further moulded her; nor had a haughty Ritual omitted to finish her."³⁹ The morning after receiving the letter he was to learn more of her worldly, haughty religion. At that time the Reverend Mr. Falsgrave (false-grave?), the minister of their church, was to have breakfast with Mrs. Glendinning and Pierre.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 88-89.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 89-91.

³⁹Ibid., p. 125.

The conversation at the breakfast table turns to a subject so closely related to Pierre's own problem that without revealing his secret he is enlightened as to his mother's and the clergyman's attitude toward the sin of his father. A bastard child has just been born as the issue of an affair between Delly and Ned, two of the servants on the Glendinning estate, and Mrs. Glendinning declares that the man shall be made to leave the place; she would "hardly blame" Ned's own legitimate son for hating him now. When Pierre expresses regret over the wretchedness of Delly and her baby, Mrs. Glendinning says that the "mother deserves it," and in regard to the child she inquires of the minister: "what are the words of the Bible?" "The sins of the father shall be visited upon the children to the third generation," somewhat reluctantly replies the reverend man, quoting a Commandment the unjust ethics of which Melville had alluded to in Moby Dick.⁴⁰

Reflecting upon his resolution to help Isabel, Pierre asks: "Should the legitimate child shun the illegitimate, when one father is father to both?" His mother answers emphatically in the affirmative; so Pierre puts the question more pointedly to Falsgrave: "should the one refuse his highest sympathy and perfect love for the other, especially if that other be deserted by all the rest of the world? What think you would have been our blessed Savior's thoughts on such a matter? And what was that he so mildly said to the adulteress?"⁴¹ After a "long preamble" Falsgrave evades the question by saying that "one universal maxim" cannot be made "to embrace all moral contingencies. . . ." Pierre then inquires if the Biblical injunction, "Honor thy father and mother,"

⁴⁰Moby Dick, II, 230.

⁴¹In his copy of the New Testament, Melville marked Christ's words of forgiveness to the adulteress; and he owned an engraving that portrays the scene.

should not always be obeyed; for, he says, "as that command is justly said to be the only one with a promise, so it seems to be without any contingency in the application." He asks the shocking question: "For instance, should I honor my father, if I knew him to be a seducer?" Mrs. Glendinning is horrified at the very thought. The clergyman says: "that is another question in morals absolutely incapable of a definite answer, which shall be universally applicable." Pierre, "tacitly rebuked again," excuses himself and quits the room to try solving his problems alone.⁴²

Despite the discouraging words of his mother and Falsgrave, Pierre feels himself "divinely dedicated" to aid his illegitimate sister, even at the cost of all earthly affiliations and advantages.⁴³ Pierre asks heaven to confirm him in "the Christ-like feeling" he first felt:

Guide me, gird me, guard me, this day, ye sovereign powers!
. . . . On my strong faith in ye Invisibles, I stake three
whole lives this day. If ye forsake me now, -- farewell to
Faith, farewell to Truth, farewell to God; exiled for aye
from God and man, I shall declare myself equal powers with
both !⁴⁴

Two interviews with Isabel strengthen him in his conviction that he pursues the highest course.⁴⁵ He resolves to make an "unequalled renunciation" of himself. Determined to give Isabel his constant fraternal love and yet not to expose his father's guilt to his mother, Pierre decides to make the world think that by a secret marriage he has already become Isabel's husband.⁴⁶ His

⁴²Pierre, pp. 139-45.

⁴³In "the Enthusiast to Duty, the heaven-begotten Christ is born; and will not own a mortal parent, and spurns and rends all mortal bonds"; ibid., p. 149.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁵"God called thee, Pierre, not poor Bell," she says; she calls him "God's indignant ambassador" to her; ibid., pp. 224-25.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 240-41.

anticipated marriage to Lucy would thus be wrecked; but he is confronted by "this all-including query -- Lucy or God?"⁴⁷

He hardly has a choice in the matter. Melville says that "Pierre was not arguing Fixed Fate and Free Will, now; Fixed Fate and Free Will were arguing him, and Fixed Fate got the better in the debate."⁴⁸ When he tells Lucy that he is married, she swoons. When he tells his mother, she turns him out of his home. "Oh, God," cries the youth, "what callest thou that which has thus made Pierre a vagabond?"⁴⁹ He sets out for the city to make a home not only for Isabel and himself, but also for the luckless Dely. Falsgrave, the "man of God," had told him concerning Dely: "She is to depart the neighborhood; why, her own parents want her not."⁵⁰

Pierre is not positively sure that his actions are right; he has moments of dreadful doubt. Melville compares one of Pierre's dark moods to that which a certain Catholic priest once experienced. While the priest was administering the sacrament, "the Evil One suddenly propounded to him the possibility of the mere moonshine of the Christian Religion"; just as to Pierre now "the Evil One propounded the possibility of the mere moonshine of all his self-renouncing enthusiasm." By "instant and earnest prayer" the priest "had vanquished the impious Devil. Not so with Pierre." Unlike the priest, he had no Church, no Bible, "which unequivocally said to him -- 'Go on; thou art in the Right; I endorse thee all over; go on.'" With the priest it was a question of faith; "with Pierre it was a question whether certain vital acts of his were right or wrong." When Pierre considered the woe

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 253.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 254.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 256-59.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 229.

that he had brought to his mother and Lucy, he thought: "Can then my conduct be right? Lo, by my conduct I seem threatened by the possibility of a sin anomalous and accursed, so anomalous, it may well be the one for which the Scripture says, there is never forgiveness."⁵¹ His active "obedience to the loftiest behest of his soul" had already destroyed his "worldly felicity" and still threatened him with some "additional and not-to-be-thought-of woe."⁵²

In the coach that conveys him and his companions to the city, Pierre finds a tattered fragment of a pamphlet which treats of his perplexing problem. The pamphlet teaches the moral that men should not try to pattern wholly after Christ, for by so doing they are liable to become involved "in strange, unique follies and sins, unimagined before." While a man must make "certain minor self-renunciations, he must by no means make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being, or any cause, or any conceit."⁵³ The pamphlet is written in a fanciful style, and Melville makes it humorously ambiguous as to whether at the time of reading Pierre fully comprehends its contents; but he says that "Pierre may not in the end be entirely uninfluenced in his conduct by the torn pamphlet. . . ."⁵⁴ For the time being, however, the youth follows his heavenly ideal.

In describing the environment of Pierre's happy early life, Melville emphasized with italics the fact that it was "the choice fate of Pierre to have been born and bred in the country."⁵⁵

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 285-86.

⁵²Ibid., pp. 290-91.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 296-99.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 292.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 15.

His moving into the city is a great change for him. Here the people's hearts are hard as cobble-stones; the doors are locked and bolted at night; innocence is allowed to starve on the streets.⁵⁶ The "town's first welcome" to Pierre comes from a prostitute.⁵⁷ He and the two girls experience various difficulties, among which is the refusal of Glen Stanly, Pierre's cousin and former rival for Lucy's love, to recognize Pierre and give him the home he had promised. The three take cheap lodgings, and Pierre begins to write to earn a living for them.

But contact with the world has disillusioned Pierre, so that he now perceives the inscrutability and the ambiguity of life. In a scene at nightfall between himself and Isabel, he cries out to the heavens: "If to follow Virtue to her uttermost vista, where common souls never go; if by that I take hold on hell, and the uttermost virtue, after all, prove but a betraying pander to the monstrousest vice, -- then close in and crush me, ye stony walls, and into one gulf let all things tumble together!" He now seems "to half see, somehow, that the uttermost ideal of moral perfection in man is wide of the mark." He tells Isabel that "Virtue and Vice are trash"; they are "two shadows cast from one nothing. . . ." "It is all a dream -- we dream that we dreamed we dream."⁵⁸ These words are a prelude to his sin. Before Pierre had ever resolved to sacrifice himself for Isabel, he had been unconsciously aware "that, in a transcendental degree, womanly beauty, and not womanly ugliness, invited him to champion the right."⁵⁹ Their mutual love had been more intense than that of

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 321-22.

⁵⁷Ibid., pp. 330-31.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 380-82.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 151.

brother and sister; their caresses had been more intimate. Before leaving Saddle Meadows for the city, he had "imprinted repeated burning kisses upon her"; and they had "coiled together, and entangledly stood mute."⁶⁰ Now in the city on this evening she has come to comfort his soul-sickness. She blows out the candle and makes him sit down on the bed beside her. At her touch he starts up, crying: "Oh God, Isabel, unhand me!" But she throws "her arms around him" and soothes him. As the passion wells up within him, he recalls all the uncertainty of their kinship, and denies that they are brother and sister. They both say that life is "all a dream." He embraces her, and says: "How can one sin in a dream?" The scene closes with them sitting there on the bed, silent in the dark.⁶¹

In writing his novel, Pierre had been a recluse from the world for some weeks when word came that his mother had died and had willed her estate to Glen Stanly.⁶² Then one morning he received a mysterious letter from Lucy, saying that she was coming to join his household: "God Himself cannot stay me, for it is He that commands me." She intuitively feels that Pierre needs her.⁶³ Glen Stanly and Fred Tartan, her brother, fail in their effort to block her arrival.⁶⁴ Her mother, who cannot persuade her to leave Pierre, disowns her, justifying her act with the words: "whom God Himself hath abandoned forever, a mother may quit, never more to revisit."⁶⁵ With Delly's weeping and her praying that she be

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 268.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 380-82.

⁶²Ibid., p. 397.

⁶³Ibid., p. 432.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 453.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 458.

not "the servant to a greater sin" than her own,⁶⁶ and with Isabel's jealousy of Lucy manifesting itself in a threat of suicide,⁶⁷ the situation becomes more and more complicated.

Meantime, Pierre continues work on his book, "every moment becoming still the more sensible of the intensely inauspicious circumstances of all sorts under which that labor was proceeding." He is alone in his misery. Although Lucy and Isabel would have given their lives for him, "Pierre, nevertheless, in his deepest, highest part, was utterly without sympathy from anything divine, human, brute, or vegetable."⁶⁸ The ambiguities which constantly are closing in about him goad him into hostility toward the Deity; and he writes into his novel the truth that he has learned. After printing the first part of his book, his publishers reject it, charging that he has sent them "the sheets of a blasphemous rhapsody, filched from the vile Atheists, Lucian and Voltaire"; they notify him that they will sue him for their cash advances. At the same time Glen and Fred send him a letter calling him "a villainous and perjured liar." Pierre says: "These are most small circumstances; but happening just now to me, become indices to all immensities." He challenges all "the drawn-up worlds" to battle.⁶⁹

Hastening out of the apartment, he stops to tell Isabel and Lucy: "the fool of Truth, the fool of Virtue, the fool of Fate, now quits ye forever!"⁷⁰ With a brace of pistols he goes into the street and meets Glen and Fred. Glen cuts his face with

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 447.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 462-65.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 470-71.

⁶⁹Ibid., pp. 497-98.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 499.

a whip, and he kills Glen. In prison Pierre soliloquizes:

It is ambiguous still. Had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurningly portioned off the girl at Saddle Meadows, then had I been happy through a long life on earth, and perchance through a long eternity in heaven! Now, 'tis merely hell in both worlds. Well, be it hell. I will mould a trumpet of the flames, and, with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance!⁷¹

Isabel and Lucy visit him, and he exclaims: "Away! -- Good Angel and Bad Angel both! -- For Pierre is neuter now!" Isabel cries: "not thou art the murderer, but thy sister hath murdered thee, my brother, oh my brother!" At the revelation in these words, Lucy falls lifeless; and Pierre and Isabel drink death from the concealed vial of poison in Isabel's bosom.⁷²

This horrible death is a woeful ending for a life which in the beginning was so happy, pious, and undefiled. Pierre's downfall is quick and terrific. In the few months of his life which the time of the novel covers, Pierre passes from the prospective inheritance of a country estate to vagabondage; from chaste love with a sweet, innocent girl to incest with his sister; from love of all mankind to murder of his own kinsman; from reverence and love for God to railing blasphemy; from felicity in a carefree world to suicide in a prison cell. Melville has no pity for his young hero; although he loves him, he grants him no mercy. He even mocks him.⁷³ And he mocks him because Pierre sincerely and earnestly dedicates himself to the highest Christian ideals, so foolish as to believe that by sacrificing all his worldly blessings he can accomplish ultimate good for others.

An important factor in Pierre's ill fate is of course his early Christian training; for it was that which instilled into

⁷¹Ibid., p. 502.

⁷²Ibid., pp. 502-03.

⁷³See E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Pierre," The New England Quarterly, III (April, 1930), 199.

him the ideals that brought him ruin. While Pierre's ideals are represented as being truly Christian, the Church and the church-members he knew are made to appear in an unfavorable and ridiculous light. Pierre's Christian father, for all the good name and platitudes he left behind him, is discovered to have been a hypocritical adulterer. Mrs. Glendinning, who apparently considers herself one of the "delegated stewards of God's inscrutable dispensations,"⁷⁴ is revealed as being proud, selfish, pharisaical, and cruel. The Reverend Mr. Falsgrave is nothing short of contemptible. Since he is the only representative of the ministry in the novel, and since Melville painstakingly portrays him, he deserves special consideration.

This gentle and beaming but insincere and spineless person is presented with much more lavish irony than had been bestowed on the chaplain in White Jacket.⁷⁵ Upon his entrance into the breakfast scene Melville describes him in detail. On this occasion Falsgrave is quite happy, for he is in the presence of the "benefactress, from whose purse, he could not help suspecting, came a great part of his salary"; and he knows that Mrs. Glendinning and Pierre are particularly fond of him. Indeed, he is "well worthy" of their good opinion:

Nature had been royally bountiful to him in his person. In his happier moments, as the present, his face was radiant with a courtly, but mild benevolence; his person was nobly robust and dignified; while the remarkable smallness of his feet, and the almost infantile delicacy, and vivid whiteness and purity of his hands, strikingly contrasted with his fine girth and stature.⁷⁶

His hands, it is to be noted, are not those of a laboring man;

⁷⁴Pierre, p. 141.

⁷⁵See White Jacket, pp. 193-94.

⁷⁶Pierre, pp. 136-37.

they are not "hard" from toil, as Isabel's are;⁷⁷ their softness, one would infer, is the mark of one who lives by "that most true Christian doctrine of the utter nothingness of good works"78

Although born the son of a poor farmer, by means of his scholastic pursuits and by the indulgence of his "taste for the choicest female society," Falsgrave had acquired manners and accomplishments which sweetly graced his figure.

Heaven had given him his fine, silver-keyed person for a flute to play on in this world; and he was nearly the perfect master of it. His graceful motions had the undulatoriness of melodious sounds. You almost thought you heard, not saw him. So much the wonderful, yet natural gentleman he seemed, that more than once Mrs. Glendinning had held him up to Pierre as a splendid example of the polishing and gentlemanizing influences of Christianity upon the mind and manners. . . .

The excellence of Falsgrave's mind and talents and "his refined affinity to all things beautiful, visible or invisible," were certified by "his eloquent persuasiveness in the pulpit" and by his "various fugitive papers upon subjects of nature, art, and literature. . . ."79

Sitting at Mrs. Glendinning's table with a large white napkin in his bosom, Falsgrave appears to be "a sacred priest, indeed, breakfasting in his surplice." And he breaks bread in such a Christlike manner that "beheld of old by Leonardo," he "might have given that artist no despicable hint touching his celestial painting." He is a man of "beaming excellent-heartedness"; in fact, Mrs. Glendinning says: "if there is any one blemish in the character of the Reverend Mr. Falsgrave, it is that the benevolence of his heart, too much warps in him the holy rigor of our church's doctrines." It is "an irresistible dislike to manifesting an absolute dissent from the honest convictions of any persons,

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 158.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 192.

⁷⁹Ibid., pp. 137-38.

whom he both socially and morally esteems," which makes him, between Pierre and Mrs. Glendinning, give his circumspect, evasive answers to Pierre's simple and direct ethical questions. Christ counselled his disciples to use the wisdom of the serpent and the gentleness of the dove. Falsgrave befittingly wears a "cameo brooch, representing the allegorical union of the serpent and the dove."⁸⁰

In spite of his mildness and tact, however, he falls out of favor with both Pierre and Mrs. Glendinning. When Pierre pays a midnight visit to the minister and learns that Delly Ulver "is to be driven out to starve or rot; and this, too, by the acquiescence of a man of God," he condemns Falsgrave and the whole clergy, saying: "But I do not blame thee; I think I begin to see how thy profession is unavoidably entangled by all fleshly alliances, and cannot move with godly freedom in a world of benefices."⁸¹ Mrs. Glendinning is a great deal more caustic. Grieved and outraged over her son's announcement of marriage, when she "paced the room" in Falsgrave's presence, he "advanced toward her cautiously, and with the profoundest deference, which was almost a cringing, spoke":

"It is the hour of woe to thee; and I confess my cloth hath no consolation for thee yet awhile. Permit me to withdraw from thee, leaving my best prayers for thee, that thou mayst know some peace, ere this now shut-out sun goes down. Send for me whenever thou desirest me. -- May I go now?"

"Begone! and let me not hear thy soft, mincing voice, which is an infamy to a man! Begone, thou helpless, and unhelping one!"⁸²

The clergyman ignominiously retreats from the room and from the pages of the novel.⁸³

⁸⁰Ibid., pp. 138-43.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 230.

⁸²Ibid., p. 270.

⁸³In addition to the criticism of the clergy presented in the portrait of Falsgrave, it might be noted that Melville makes

It is the fragmentary pamphlet found by Pierre, however, that most clearly sets forth Melville's views on Christianity during this period, and therefore that document fruitfully rewards a detailed examination. The direct bearing of the pamphlet on the plot of the novel has already been noted: had Pierre fully understood and been guided by the truth it teaches, his tragedy would have been averted. Plotinus Plinlimmon, the author of the curious article, heads the Apostles, among whom Pierre finds a home, and is described as an eccentric philosopher in whose "eye, the gay immortal youth Apollo, seemed enshrined," while on his "brow, old Saturn cross-legged sat"; his face "expressed a cheerful content," yet also a passive, repellent "non-Benevolence," and, over all, an "Inscrutableness."⁸⁴ It seems befitting that the author be thus portrayed, for although the pamphlet is fancifully written, it contains calm and measured wisdom which appears to have resulted from long, impartial reflection. It considers Christianity from a broad, universal point of view with the steadiness and sympathy of an intelligent idealist who coldly compromises with facts.

By way of introduction to the pamphlet, Melville says that any Christian youth who is really serious is eventually confronted by "this startling solecism: -- That while, as the grand condition of acceptance to God, Christianity calls upon all men to renounce this world; yet by all odds the most Mammonish part of this world -- Europe and America -- are owned by none but professed Christian nations, who glory in the owning, and seem to have some reason therefor." This incites the youth to "the earnest reperusal of the Gospels: the intense self-absorption into that greatest real

passing jests about the papacy, touching upon the Pope's wholesale blessing of rosaries (*ibid.*, p. 351), and upon the sanctity of "the lips which had but once saluted the great toe of the Pope" (p. 367).

⁸⁴*ibid.*, p. 404.

miracle of all religions, the Sermon on the Mount." The "tenderness and loving-kindness" here make all Christian youths exult in the thought "that the founder of their holy religion gave utterance to sentences so infinitely sweet and soothing as these; sentences which embody all the love of the Past, and all the love which can be imagined in any conceivable Future." The resulting emotions seem more than human. "This is of God! cries the heart, and in that cry ceases all inquisition." But when the youth looks out and sees the falseness and depravity of the world, he concludes that "this world is a lie." Then begins the search for the secret of reconciling the world with the soul. But this secret has never been found. Plato, Spinoza, Goethe, the New England Transcendentalists, and others who claim to have found it, all are "impostors." They "pretend somehow to have got an answer" from God; but "how can a man get a Voice out of Silence?"⁸⁵ After such a foreword, Melville modestly presents the pamphlet, saying that to him "it seems more the excellently illustrated re-statement of a problem, than the solution of the problem itself"; but since men generally accept "mere illustrations" for solutions, what is here presented "may help to the temporary quiet of some inquiring mind. . . ."⁸⁶

The pamphlet, entitled "Chronometricals and Horologicals," is the fragmentary copy of a lecture, the first of a series of three hundred and thirty-three. Stating the premise that since most men consider life on this earth as probationary, therefore our wisdom must be accepted as provisional, the author proceeds to compare heavenly and earthly wisdom to different standards of time maintained at different longitudes of the globe. Christ, with his celestial wisdom, is likened to a chronometer regulated

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 288-90.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 293.

by Greenwich time; and man, with his best terrestrial wisdom, is likened to a horologue carrying the time of a certain locality -- Chinese time, for instance. Just as no Chinaman would be so foolish as to live by Greenwich time -- "going to bed at noon, say, when his neighbors would be sitting down to dinner" -- so no sensible man tries to live according to heavenly standards. Though "the earthly wisdom of man be heavenly folly to God; so also, conversely, is the heavenly wisdom of God an earthly folly to man." The teachings of Christ seemed "folly to the Jews," because while Christ proposed celestial standards, the Jews lived by those of Jerusalem. Christ said: "My wisdom (time) is not of this world." And "whatever is really peculiar in the wisdom of Christ seems precisely the same folly to-day as it did 1850 years ago."⁸⁷

To remind men that their wisdom is not His, God occasionally sends a heavenly ambassador to earth.⁸⁸ But He does not intend that ordinary men should heed any intuitions which would make them fatally hurl themselves against all earthly standards. As early as in Typee Melville called attention to the fact that an attempt to do much good may nevertheless produce evil,⁸⁹ and here he elaborates on the thought:

Though Christ encountered woe in both the precept and the practice of his chronometricals [heavenly ideals], yet did he remain throughout entirely without folly or sin. Whereas, almost invariably, with inferior beings, the absolute effort to live in this world according to the strict letter of the chronometricals is, somehow, apt to involve those inferior beings eventually in strange, unique follies and sins, unimagined before.⁹⁰

It is against common sense that a man should "make a complete unconditional sacrifice of himself in behalf of any other being, or

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 295.

⁸⁸ This recalls the statement in Mardi that Alma came to earth at different times in the forms of various teachers; see Mardi, II, 31.

⁸⁹ Typee, p. 266.

⁹⁰ Pierre, p. 296.

any cause, or any conceit." It is against all natural law. "God's own sun does not abate one tittle of its heat in July, however you swoon with that heat in the sun. And if it did abate its heat on your behalf," the document argues, "then the wheat and the rye would not ripen; and so, for the incidental benefit of one, a whole population would suffer."⁹¹

The pamphlet explicitly denies that it justifies "all the acts which wicked men may perform"; for "downright wicked men sin" against the best earthly ideals as well as against the heavenly; this fact is proved by "their spontaneous liability to remorse." The pamphlet merely shows that "for the mass of men, the highest abstract heavenly righteousness is not only impossible, but would be entirely out of place, and positively wrong in a world like this." No average man ever turned his other cheek to be struck, or gave all he owned to the poor; for such deeds are heavenly. When men "go to heaven, it will be quite another thing"; for in heaven "the right cheek will never be smitten," and "there will be no poor to give to."⁹²

While man cannot attain to heavenly excellence on earth, he can do his mortal best, and that is a great deal. The mean which Melville advances is noteworthy for the broad theism, tolerance, human kindness, and realization of mortal limitations that it embodies:

. . . . if a man gives with a certain self-considerate generosity to the poor; abstains from doing downright ill to any man; does his convenient best in a general way to do good to his whole race; takes watchful loving care of his wife and children, relatives, and friends; is perfectly tolerant to all other men's opinions, whatever they may be; is an honest dealer, an honest citizen, and all that; and more especially if he believe that there is a God for infidels, as well as for believers, and acts upon that belief; then, though such a

⁹¹Ibid., p. 299.

⁹²Ibid., pp. 298-99.

man falls infinitely short of the chronometrical standard, though all his actions are entirely horologic; -- yet such a man need never lastingly despond, because he is sometimes guilty of some minor offence: -- hasty words, impulsively returning a blow, fits of domestic petulance, selfish enjoyment of a glass of wine while he knows there are those around him who lack a loaf of bread. I say he need never lastingly despond on account of his perpetual liability to these things; because not to do them, and their like, would be to be an angel, a chronometer; whereas, he is a man and a horologe.⁹³

Melville even draws on the authority of God to emphasize the truth of his argument: "A virtuous expediency, then, seems the highest desirable or attainable earthly excellence for the mass of men, and is the only earthly excellence that their Creator intended for them."⁹⁴

He says that a "due appreciation of this matter will do good to man"; and here he brings a telling accusation against the Church:

For, hitherto, being authoritatively taught by his dogmatical teachers that he must, while on earth, aim at heaven, and attain it, too, in all his earthly acts, on pain of eternal wrath; and finding by experience that this is utterly impossible; in his despair, he is too apt to run clean away into all manner of moral abandonment, self-deceit, and hypocrisy (cloaked, however, mostly under an aspect of the most respectable devotion); or else he openly runs, like a mad dog, into atheism.⁹⁵

Aiming at virtuous ideals which are attainable will put "an end to that fatal despair of becoming at all good," which often afflicts those who have tried to realize the unattainable.⁹⁶

As final proof for his thesis Melville turns to the history of Christianity. Considering his early training in Christian ideals and his earlier exhortations made in the name of Christ, his pronouncement here is momentous:

⁹³Ibid., p. 298.

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 299.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 299.

⁹⁶Ibid., pp. 299-300.

But if any man say, that such a doctrine as this I lay down is false, is impious; I would charitably refer that man to the history of Christendom for the last 1800 years; and ask him, whether, in spite of all the maxims of Christ, that history is not just as full of blood, violence, wrong, and iniquity of every kind, as any previous portion of the world's story? Therefore, it follows, that so far as practical results are concerned -- regarded in a purely earthly light -- the only great original moral doctrine of Christianity (*i.e.* the chronometrical gratuitous return of good for evil, as distinguished from the horological forgiveness of injuries taught by some of the Pagan philosophers), has been found (horologically) a false one; because after 1800 years' inculcation from tens of thousands of pulpits, it has proved entirely impracticable.⁹⁷

After this concise indictment of Christianity, Melville brings the fragmentary pamphlet to a conveniently abrupt termination, stating that besides propounding "what the best mortal men do daily practise; and what all really wicked men are far removed from"; the lecture also offers "consolation to the earnest man, who, among all his human frailties, is still agonizingly conscious of the beauty of chronometrical excellence."⁹⁸

As his preoccupation with the subject would indicate, Melville himself was agonizingly conscious of the beauty of heavenly excellence. And his agony was the greater for having failed disastrously in trying to attain what he conceived to be the highest virtue. By sad experience he had learned the impracticability of the Christian ideal, which apparently caused him to attack the ideal in the pamphlet and in the story of *Pierre*. If the novel were considered for only its more obvious import, it would be valuable as a document of Melville's intellectual history. But it calls for a more thorough interpretative study.

A closer study, moreover, reveals that by means of symbolism Melville relates in *Pierre* the story of his whole tragical

⁹⁷Ibid., p. 300.

⁹⁸Ibid.

spiritual career up to the time of writing that book.⁹⁹ Here he reviews the account of his inner life as told in Mardi and in Moby Dick¹⁰⁰ and continues it, to end it with the prophesied fatal conclusion. In Pierre he dramatizes the life of his mind more vividly than in the other two works; the motives, the experiences, and the consequences, all transpire, and they throw much light on the influence that Christianity had on Melville's life. The symbolism used is in some ways similar to that in Mardi, but it is more fully elaborated and is more imposing in its final effect.

The explanation which Melville gives of Pierre's vision of Enceladus affords the key to the veiled meaning of the book;¹⁰¹ but this episode may perhaps be more profitably discussed after certain significant relationships have been brought out. Suffice it here to note that the passage on Enceladus reveals that Pierre's father symbolizes the Deity and his mother symbolizes the world. With this parentage Pierre, like Taji in Mardi, is a demigod; and he is also like Taji in that he represents Melville's spiritual being. Pierre's attitude toward his father and mother is significant in that it appears to represent Melville's changing views

⁹⁹In my discussion of the symbolism of Pierre I am indebted to two recent articles dealing with the novel. Lewis Mumford, Herman Melville (New York, 1929), pp. 220-21, is the first critic I know of who had a vague insight into what seems to be the true symbolical meaning of the book; but he seems to have made only a good wild guess, and not to have followed it up with a thorough analysis of the novel. E. L. Grant Watson, "Melville's Pierre," The New England Quarterly, III (April, 1930), 195-234, thoroughly studied the novel from a psychological point of view and divined some of the symbolism. George C. Homans, "The Dark Angel: The Tragedy of Herman Melville," The New England Quarterly, V (Oct., 1932), 699-730, assumed more of a philosophical point of view; his views appear to me to be the most enlightening on the symbolism. My own views are in some ways slightly different from those advanced by Watson and Homans.

¹⁰⁰Refer to pp. 65-70 and 123-28 of the complete dissertation, on file only in the University of Chicago Libraries.

¹⁰¹See Watson, op. cit., p. 229, and Homans, op. cit., pp. 725-26.

toward the Deity and the world. A more detailed examination of the novel serves to convince one that Melville gave a great deal of pains to developing the symbolism.

Pierre had been brought up to think of his father as the "personification of perfect human goodness and virtue."

Before this shrine, Pierre poured out the fulness of all young life's most reverential thoughts and beliefs. Not to God had Pierre ever gone in his heart, unless by ascending the steps of that shrine, and so making it the vestibule of his abstractest religion.¹⁰²

There were two portraits of Pierre's father -- a large drawing-room portrait, which Pierre's mother said was authentic, and a smaller one, given to Pierre by an aunt, which his mother thought "namelessly unpleasant and repelling";¹⁰³ Pierre kept the latter in his own apartment. The portrait which Mrs. Glendinning disliked had been painted before her marriage. It portrayed Pierre's father as ambiguously smiling, and seeming to say: "Pierre, believe not the drawing-room painting; that is not thy father; or, at least, is not all of thy father. . . . Look again, I am thy father as he more truly was."¹⁰⁴ The revelatory letter from Isabel, who proves to be a symbol for the introspective tendency of Melville's mind, caused Pierre to reverse this ambiguously smiling portrait on the wall to represent his "reversed idea" of his father;¹⁰⁵ but he would not let it hang thus and stored it away.¹⁰⁶ Later he burned the portrait to ashes by casting it into the fire, which is an "eloquent symbol" of the "ultimate Truth itself."¹⁰⁷ Since his mother at this time has already disowned

¹⁰²Pierre, p. 93.

¹⁰³Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., p. 276.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., p. 306.

him, after burning the portrait the youth says: "Henceforth, cast-out Pierre hath no paternity, and no past; and since the Future is one blank to all; therefore, twice-disinherited Pierre stands untrammelledly his ever-present self! -- free to do his own self-will and present fancy to whatever end!"¹⁰⁸

To interpret: it appears that Melville's mother-world had told him in his youth that his Father in heaven was perfect; and Melville believed this, though from an early date he held his own slightly different personal conception of God. But upon his first real acquaintance with metaphysical reasoning, he conceived an entirely different idea of God. He considered it his divine duty to sacrifice himself to the interests of the profoundest use of the mind, even though to do so deprived him of the favor of the Church and the world. There is of course the possibility that his motive was somewhat influenced by the fascinating lure that this deeper reasoning had for him. Taji wondered if his rescue of Yillah had not been inspired by his desire to have her as a beautiful companion.¹⁰⁹ So Isabel's beauty may have affected Pierre in his resolution to protect her.¹¹⁰

The truth attained through metaphysical reasoning apparently seemed to Melville as though it were one with the only reality, as though it were of the Deity itself. It is of the utmost significance that Pierre believes Isabel to be the daughter of his father, for as such she is divine. "That intense and indescribable longing" in Isabel's letter "was the unsuppressible and unmistakable cry of the godhead through her soul, commanding Pierre to fly to her, and do his highest and most glorious duty in the

¹⁰⁸Ibid., p. 277.

¹⁰⁹ See Mardi, I, 157.

¹¹⁰ See above, p. 143.

world."¹¹¹ Pierre tells her that she is "made of that fine, unshared stuff of which God makes his seraphim";¹¹² he says: "The gods made thee of a holyday, when all the common world was done. . . ."¹¹³ Since Isabel symbolizes the dark, unexplored region of the soul, or mind, Melville presents her as an outcast figure of shrouded mystery.

Isabel says that she "never knew a mortal mother"; her lips "never touched a woman's breast."¹¹⁴ Her early life was dark and bewildered, spent across the sea in a secluded forest hut with an uncommunicative old man and woman and a cat that hissed at her. She dimly recollected crossing the sea, and then living for a time in a mad-house. Now she is mad sometimes.¹¹⁵ She is even bewildered in relating these memories to Pierre, and in telling him why she believes that his father is her own. She has a "face of supernaturalness," a face of a "wonderful loveliness, and a still more wonderful loneliness."¹¹⁶ When she leans close over her guitar, the weird song that comes from beneath her dark flowing hair suggests the supernaturalness of her being:

Mystery! Mystery!
Mystery of Isabel!
Mystery! Mystery!
Isabel and Mystery!¹¹⁷

She says on one occasion: "Pierre, I am a poor girl, born in the midst of mystery, bred in mystery, and still surviving to mystery.

¹¹¹Pierre, p. 243.

¹¹²Ibid., p. 266.

¹¹³Ibid., p. 451.

¹¹⁴Ibid., p. 160.

¹¹⁵Ibid., p. 263.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 63.

¹¹⁷Ibid., pp. 178, 211. The second version adds the line: "Mystery!"

So mysterious myself, the air and the earth are unutterable to me; no word have I to express them." When Pierre himself talks wildly, she continues: "Pierre, when thou just hovered on the verge, thou wert a riddle to me; but now, that thou art deep down in the gulf of the soul, -- now, when thou wouldst be lunatic to wise men, perhaps -- now doth poor ignorant Isabel begin to comprehend thee."¹¹⁸ Her unsubstantial nature makes her "all plastic" in Pierre's hands,¹¹⁹ she tells him:

Thy hand is the caster's ladle, Pierre, which holds me entirely fluid. Into thy forms and slightest moods of thought, thou pourest me; and I there solidify to that form, and take it on, and thenceforth wear it, till once more thou mouldest me anew.¹²⁰

Thus, apparently, Melville describes the substance of the soul.

He had concluded in regard to the soul: "Appalling is the soul of a man! Better might one be pushed off into the material spaces beyond the uttermost orbit of our sun, than once feel himself fairly afloat in himself!" He goes further to say: "appallingly vacant as vast is the soul of man!"¹²¹ The essence of this truth is expressed in Isabel's words to Pierre: "all my life, all my full soul, contents not my brother."¹²² Using a different figure, Melville says: "it is not for man to follow the trail of truth too far, since by so doing he entirely loses the directing compass of his mind; for arrived at the Pole, to whose barrenness only it points, there, the needle indifferently respects all points of the horizon alike."¹²³

¹¹⁸Ibid., pp. 381-82. On her hate for shallow surmises and her love for unfathomable mysteries, see p. 215.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 264.

¹²⁰Ibid., p. 451.

¹²¹Ibid., pp. 396-97.

¹²²Ibid., p. 435.

¹²³Ibid., p. 231.

Although Melville felt that he had obeyed his divinest impulse by searching deeply as possible for truth, he discovered that he would have been wiser had he used moderation. Plinlimmon's pamphlet decries complete sacrifice of oneself and urges compromise. In the beginning of the story Pierre's "good angel" prompts him on the course that leads to his self-renunciation for Isabel; his "bad angel" tempts him to ignore her. But after he has involved himself, his two angels exchange offices, and it is his good angel that would save him from Isabel. When Lucy writes the letter saying that she is coming to join Pierre, she states the reason: "a deep, deep voice assures me, that all noble as thou art, Pierre, some terrible jeopardy involves thee, which my continual presence only can drive away."¹²⁴ Thus Lucy evidently symbolizes the simple objective inclination of Melville's mind, the faculties that cherish the ordinary pleasures of life. Upon learning of Lucy's coming, the jealous Isabel truthfully declares that Lucy is Pierre's good angel and that she herself is his bad angel.¹²⁵ After Lucy has arrived, she exerts a beneficent sway over Pierre: "Pierre felt that some strange heavenly influence was near him, to keep him from some uttermost harm; Isabel was alive to some untraceable displacing agency."¹²⁶ Lucy is of practical aid to Pierre; Isabel not only does nothing to help him, but also begrudges him the time in which he works.¹²⁷ Pierre's good angel, however, has come to him too late.

When in the last stages of writing Moby Dick, Melville had written to Hawthorne: "It is a frightful poetical creed that

¹²⁴Ibid., p. 433.

¹²⁵Ibid., pp. 437-38.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 470.

¹²⁷Ibid., pp. 459, 463, 485.

the cultivation of the brain eats out the heart."¹²⁸ But it appears that in the symbolism of Pierre he tells how he himself followed introspection to the point of wrecking his spiritual life. In the same letter to Hawthorne just referred to, Melville says that he stands for the heart. And in Pierre he bursts out: "Pah! the brains grow maggoty without a heart; but the heart's the preserving salt itself, and can keep sweet without the head."¹²⁹ It seems not unreasonable to think of Lucy as roughly signifying the heart and Isabel the head. Pierre may also be said to be, in a general way, an elaborate commentary on the idea expressed in the story of the catnip and the amaranth which is imbedded in the book

. . . . every spring the amaranthine and celestial flower gained on the mortal household herb; every autumn the catnip died, but never an autumn made the amaranth to wane. The catnip and the amaranth! -- man's earthly household peace, and the ever-encroaching appetite for God.¹³⁰

Melville's "earthly household peace," according to the symbolism of Pierre, was destroyed by his introspective effort to satisfy his "ever-encroaching appetite for God."

He had sought the final truth; he had endeavored to reflect upon the only reality; he had plunged into the dark, mysterious realms of the mind. But he had learned that the phantom of reality he sought to seize was his own shadow. In Moby Dick he remarks on the deeper meaning of "that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. . . . It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to

¹²⁸Julian Hawthorne, op. cit., I, 404.

¹²⁹Pierre, p. 445. In his copy of Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse (New York, 1846), p. 16, Melville underlined and checkmarked the words: "Thought grows mouldy." The volume is dated in Melville's hand, 1850.

¹³⁰Pierre, p. 480.

it all."¹³¹ Pierre, Melville says, "fell dabbling in the vomit of his loathed identity."¹³² The figure that Pierre uses in explaining to Isabel the sameness of virtue and vice may have been suggested to Melville by philosophical writings that he knew. Pierre says that virtue and vice are "two shadows cast from one nothing."¹³³ According to the opinions of Spinoza and Kant, both of whom Melville apparently knew,¹³⁴ "there was no causal connection between mind and body, but both were the shadow thrown by some underlying reality, just as two shadows are often seen thrown by the same object when two lights exist on the other side of it."¹³⁵ Had Melville sacrificed himself to mind to find it only a twin shadow of matter?

The explanation of Pierre's vision of Enceladus' storming the inaccessible heavenly ramparts affords a clue which hints at the answer. In the dream Pierre sees his own face "on the Titan's armless trunk." Melville interprets:

Old Titan's self was the son of incestuous Coelus and Terra, the son of incestuous Heaven and Earth. And Titan married his mother Terra, another and accumulatively incestuous match. And thereof Enceladus was one issue. So Enceladus was both the son and grandson of an incest; and even thus, there had been born from the organic blended heavenliness and earthliness of Pierre, another mixed, uncertain, heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated mood; which again, by its terrestrial taint held down to its terrestrial mother, generated there the present doubly incestuous Enceladus within him; so that the present mood of Pierre -- that reckless sky-assaulting mood of his, was nevertheless on one side the grandson of the sky.¹³⁶

¹³¹Moby Dick, I, 3-4.

¹³²Pierre, p. 239.

¹³³Ibid., p. 382.

¹³⁴Refer to pp. 17 and 125 of the complete dissertation, on file only in the University of Chicago Libraries.

¹³⁵Joseph Needham, "Mechanistic Biology and the Religious Consciousness," in Science, Religion, and Reality (ed. Joseph Needham; London, 1925), p. 255.

¹³⁶Pierre, pp. 482-83.

Born of his father, the Deity, and his mother, the world, Pierre's "heaven-aspiring, but still not wholly earth-emancipated" soul gives rise to his "sky-assaulting mood" by uniting with the earth-substance symbolized by Isabel. Isabel takes the place of Pierre's mother in the incestuous relationship. Melville subtly suggests the symbolical relationship of Isabel and Mrs. Glendinning. In the early part of the novel Pierre habitually calls his mother "Sister."¹³⁷ And since Melville thought of the eyes as windows and the body as the house,¹³⁸ it is significant that the room in which Pierre confidentially talks with his mother and that in which Isabel tells him her story both are rooms with double case-ments.¹³⁹ Pierre has only a boyish affection for his mother, however, and his love for Isabel develops into incest. Pierre believed Isabel to be the daughter of heaven; she proved to be of earth also. Her duality mirrors his own identity, and his incest with her symbolizes his Narcissus-like fate. At the end she cries: "thy sister hath murdered thee, my brother, oh my brother!" and the poison with which they commit suicide is concealed at her breast.¹⁴⁰

If the tragical conclusion of the novel can be accepted as describing the state of Melville's spiritual life at the time of writing Pierre, a more pathetic condition can hardly be imagined. By killing his cousin, Pierre "had extinguished his house

¹³⁷Ibid., p. 4: "they were wont to call each other brother and sister"; passim. See Watson, op. cit., p. 227, and Homans, op. cit., p. 724.

¹³⁸Moby Dick, I, 11: "Yes, these eyes are windows, and this body of mine is the house." Typee, p. 293, refers to "eyelids" as "these shutters to the windows of his soul." Pierre, p. 475: "the only visible outward symbols of that soul -- his eyes. . . ."

¹³⁹Pierre, pp. 265, 269. See Homans, op. cit., p. 724.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 502.

in slaughtering the only unoutlawed human being by the name of Glendinning";¹⁴¹ and this may well symbolize Melville's suicide of his public self. Lucy's death, which accompanies Pierre's and Isabel's, apparently symbolizes the death of Melville's more natural mental tendencies. The symbolism of the book gives a tragic meaning to the words which Pierre speaks in the prison:

It is ambiguous still. Had I been heartless now, disowned, and spurning off the girl at Saddle Meadows, then had I been happy through a long life on earth, and perchance through a long eternity in heaven! Now, 'tis merely hell in both worlds. Well, be it hell. I will mould a trumpet of the flames, and, with my breath of flame, breathe back my defiance!¹⁴²

If Melville had ignored the call to sacrifice himself to introspective reasoning and had wedded himself to the untroubled objective life, he would have remained happy. As it was, he had become the fool of Virtue and the fool of Truth, and he now hated and defied the God who had made him the fool of Fate.

Without understanding the symbolism of the novel, the reviewers denounced Pierre on several scores. They ridiculed the style and the metaphysics of the book; they called Melville immoral, irreligious, and even insane. Fitz-James O'Brien fairly well represented the contemporary attitude when he said that all of Melville's books "have had their own share of success, and their own peculiar merits, always saving and excepting Pierre -- wild, inflated, repulsive that it is."¹⁴³

Severe as the criticism was, the public gave Pierre just the reception that Melville had intended it should have. Pierre's

¹⁴¹Ibid., p. 502.

¹⁴²Ibid., p. 502.

¹⁴³"Our Young Authors -- Melville," Putnam's Monthly Magazine, I (Feb., 1853), 156. (I have italicized the title of the novel in the quotation.) For an analysis of the contemporary reviews of Pierre, see Hetherington, op. cit., pp. 294-300.

spitting upon his book and thus getting "the start of the wise world's worst abuse of it"¹⁴⁴ may be taken as indicative of Melville's attitude in giving Pierre to the public. "The man Dante Alighieri received unforgivable affronts and insults from the world; and the poet Dante Alighieri bequeathed his immortal curse to it, in the sublime malediction of the Inferno."¹⁴⁵ For the insults that the world had given him, in praising his simple works and in ignoring or damning his best, Melville apparently bequeathed the world his curse in Pierre. It appears that he wrote his own novel as he represented Pierre as writing:

Now he gave jeer for jeer, and taunted the apes that jibed him. . . . For the pangs in his heart, he put down hoots on the paper. . . . In that lonely little closet of his, Pierre foretasted all that this world hath either of praise or dispraise; and thus foretasting both goblets, anticipatngly hurled them both in its teeth. All panegyric, all denunciation, all criticism of any sort, would come too late for Pierre.¹⁴⁶

Melville's great mental and spiritual suffering made him invulnerable to the thrusts of the critics. He had worked himself into so frightful a nervous condition that his family had physicians examine him for insanity. The physicians pronounced him sane and assumed responsibility for his actions; but authoritative tradition survives that tells a pathetic story of his life during this period.¹⁴⁷ His disillusionment in God and man had brought him to a despondency so profound that it were idle to say more of the religious views that he then held.

¹⁴⁴Pierre, p. 498.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 235-36.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 472-73.

¹⁴⁷I base this statement upon personal talks with Mrs. Eleanor Melville Metcalf and with Professor Raymond Weaver.

CONCLUSIONS

The tragedy of Melville's religious life lay in the conflict between his idealism and his rationalism. Melville was a man of powerful emotions. Slow but firm in his comprehension as a youth, he built during his early years a strong faith upon what he was taught and what he conceived to be revealed truth; and this faith inspired in him a beautiful idealism. His ideals became a permanent, vital part of himself.

Later, as a young man, he began to think critically upon the fundamental doctrines of his faith. It is Mardi that first shows him in this role; here he declared his resolution to pursue his course of reasoning to the end, even though the end should be his ruin. For a period he deified the reason. But by the time he wrote Pierre, he concluded that his indulgence in metaphysics had revealed to him only the ambiguity of good and evil and the futility of trying to discover the final truth.

His faith was then undermined. He was convinced that God is unjust; that Christ is not the divine Son of God; that there is no earthly way of knowing whether or not there is an individual immortality; and that man is guided by selfish motives.

His scepticism brought him to such barren fields that in his later life he cherished all the more the comfort that he found in goodwill. He believed that what salvation there is on earth lies in love and goodness; and these were best symbolized for him by the Christ of the Sermon on the Mount. For all the freethought in his head, he was to his death very much a Christian at heart.

Because of the peculiar changes, it is worth while to note the trend of Melville's thought in regard to certain religious topics that interested him throughout his life. His works indicate that first one subject, then another, was uppermost in his mind. White Jacket, for instance, has much to say concerning Christ, but Moby Dick, published the following year, barely mentions Christ, and deals at great length with the Deity; The Confidence-Man treats chiefly of the nature of man.

In the beginning Melville's attitude toward God was characterized by humility and reverence. In accordance with his early training, he believed that God justly inflicts punishment upon all men for their sin, and that yet through His infinite mercy it is possible for the repentant and devout to attain to immortal happiness. Typee gives evidence of his faith in a benevolent Deity. But Mardi shows a questioning, a doubting; here Melville begins to ask why God created man to live and die in misery, perhaps never to live again. By the time of writing Moby Dick his profound sympathy for mankind made him defiant toward the Creator. Proof that he remained so to the end of his life is contained in Clarel, Timoleon, and even in Billy Budd.

While Melville's attitude toward Christ himself changed, it was the loving-kindness taught by Christ that gave rise to Melville's lasting idealism. From Typee one would infer that at the time of writing that book Melville still believed in the divinity of Christ. Mardi testifies to his great doubt in the matter; yet in the chapters on the isle of Serenia he pays one of the finest conceivable tributes to the religion that embraces Christ as the Master. In White Jacket he used the teachings of Christ in making an earnest and impassioned plea to his fellowmen to remedy some of the worst evils of their civilization.

Moby Dick, however, is singularly lacking in references to Christ, and here it is even hinted that Jesus was epicene and not worthy of admiration. Pierre acknowledges the heavenly perfection of Christ, but severely indicts his ideals as impracticable, and liable to make a man run blindly into greater sins than he normally would commit. The pain of disillusionment made Melville at least occasionally regret that he ever lost his faith in Jesus, as the lament in his journal of 1856-57 and the agonizing in Clarel testify. Christ was the greatest and the dearest spiritual influence in his life.

Although Melville was taught in his youth that mankind is depraved, his residence among the Typees, to which might possibly be added the influence of Rousseau, caused him to believe that man is much more noble in the primitive state than under Christianity. Mardi is full of good-natured yet no less real pessimism in regard to man, and contains sympathy to a proportionate degree. Redburn and particularly White Jacket declare that if humanity but made the effort, it could exalt itself to a far higher level. The reforming zeal is absent from Moby Dick, but the strong feeling for mankind is there in greater abundance than ever before.

Soon afterwards Melville's thought took a more cynical turn. The Confidence-Man is a monument to his misanthropy, which seems to have been largely a transfer of his distrust of the Creator to the creature. He was convinced that men are what they were made. In his later works, such as Battle-Pieces and Clarel, there is less bitterness and more sympathy and gentleness toward man.

If Melville could have believed that man is immortal, he would have been spared much painful reasoning. Having in his youth looked upon this world as but a vestibule to another, he

was perplexed and distressed to find that there are no legitimate grounds for such an expectation. There is an appalling amount of discussion of the matter in Mardi; and Clarel shows that a quarter of a century later Melville was still wondering and still hoping that man's death leads to a celestial life.

The Church afforded Melville small spiritual comfort, and its imperfections caused him to bring many pertinent charges against it. The more he learned of it, the less he retained of his early reverence for it. Typee and Omoo are notable for their attacks upon the missionaries, and for their unfavorable implications concerning Christianity at large. In the isle of Maramma in Mardi Melville satirized the superstition, bigotry, hypocrisy, and mammonism of the Church; and in the isle of Serenia he presented what he conceived to be the ideal Christianity, which is marked by the absence of ecclesiasticism.

In Moby Dick he wrote comparatively little criticism of the Church proper; but in Pierre he made a powerful assault upon it, charging that the history of the last 1800 years proves Christianity to be a failure. For several reasons Pierre is the most significant document of his thought regarding Christianity. Later evidence, such as the rejected story "The Two Temples," indicates his lasting critical attitude toward the Church; and Clarel, with some praise for its virtues, condemns practically all the evils of Christianity that Melville ever pointed out.

The bent toward Calvinistic theology that Melville's mind was given early in life thwarted his development of a liberal, happy attitude. The pessimistic temperament that he inherited from his family and the rigid and gloomy religious environment in which he was bred were responsible for the greater part of the misery that he experienced from the prime of his career as

an author to his death. While his sentiments were influenced by the romanticism and the humanitarianism of the nineteenth century, the basic ideas of his thought were more indebted to the eighteenth century and previous ages.

His spiritual suffering was far greater than that of any of his eminent contemporaries. Emerson and Parker, with their Transcendental theories, and Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes, with their Unitarian views, were, in comparison with Melville, contented and optimistic. Thoreau, worshipping "the great god Pan," and Whitman, believing and feeling the goodness of everything, were relatively free from other-worldly cares. Whittier knew the peace of Quakerism. Only with Hawthorne could Melville feel any peculiar kinship, and Hawthorne concerned himself with sin rather than with evil. Perceiving and feeling the pain of suffering humanity as he did, Melville must have felt that his contemporaries were, in the main, blind or indifferent to the problem of evil, and that whatever solutions they did propose for the problem were either puerile or intellectually dishonest. Although his courage may sometimes have weakened, his intellectual honesty never failed him.

One can be profoundly moved by the tragedy of Melville's life and yet realize that his greatness as a writer was to a large extent the result of his spiritual experiences. With all its faults Mardi contains much fine writing that would never have been written but for Melville's theological cast of mind. Had his religious influences and his freethought not reacted so as to make him think of the Deity as hard-hearted and unjust, he might never have conceived Moby Dick. Pierre, with its insight into terrible and unfathomable abysses, could have been achieved only at the end of the climax of Melville's religious disillusionment.

